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Spyware watching your every on-line move

DIGITAL SURVIVOR

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As if people weren't concerned enough about Internet privacy, along comes spyware.

That's the label for software programs that secretly collect information and send it to a company via your Internet connection. And you're not aware what's going on.

What can it report? A company could learn details such as Web sites you are visiting, pages you are looking at, software installed on your personal computer, the contents of data files — the possibilities are endless.

The spyware issue has been with us for some time. RealNetworks, whose software many people use to access audio and video on the Internet, got in trouble last year when it was discovered that its RealJukebox program had a spying feature.

Users were shocked to learn it silently collected information about the music they liked and secretly uploaded that data to RealNetworks. For some people, that was extreme Big Brother behaviour. RealNetworks removed the "feature" and apologized.

Although the concept of spyware isn't new, some of the recent Internet buzz suggests that the problem is getting worse. A report at the Privacy Forum (**www.vortex.com/privacy**), for example, says that once again, RealNetworks has released software that fits the category. The forum says a "download helper" tells the firm all about the files you are getting on-line.

There was also a recent uproar about an innocuous little program called Comet Cursor that collected information about your Web activities and sent it to the software's developer. Netscape was also found to have implemented a "feature" that reported your Internet browsing activities back to it.

Also on the Internet, it recently has been reported that popular software such as Cute FTP, Abe's MP3 Finder and PeopleSeek 98 feature a module that sends you ads while you use the programs, and reports back about which ones you click on.

It gets worse. Uninstall one of these offending programs, and a spyware module stays behind. When you read about this spyware program (**grc.com/oo/aureate.htm**), you'll be convinced that this capability allows the company that developed it to do anything it likes to your computer.

Imagine the day when you'll download a simple program from the government that lets you do your taxes. Unknown to you, the program could be scanning your hard drive, grabbing accounting records from any of the well known financial programs installed on your machine. Then it could upload them to the tax authorities.

Farfetched? People were shocked when they heard about the Big Brother database that Ottawa maintains on every one of us.

To learn about software and methods that allow you to determine whether unauthorized programs are running on your machine, look at OptOut (**grc.com/optout.htm**).

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